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# THE BOOK OF THE MONTH

## THE AMERICAN LANGUAGE<sup>1</sup>

BY LAWRENCE GILMAN

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"WHEN I speak my native tongue in its utmost purity in England," said Mark Twain in 1882, "an Englishman can't understand me at all." A generation later, Sidney Low, writing in the *Westminster Gazette* (July, 1913) remarked that "we [the English] ought to learn the American language in our schools and colleges . . . We teach . . . Spanish, Russian, modern Greek, Arabic, Hindustani . . . But . . . there is nobody to teach you American. I have never seen a grammar of it, or a dictionary . . . The native speech of one hundred million of civilized people is as grossly neglected by the publishers as it is by the schoolmasters. You can find means to learn Hausa or Swahili or Cape Dutch in London more easily than the expressive, if difficult, tongue which is spoken in the office, the bar-room, the tram-car, from the snows of Alaska to the mouths of the Mississippi, and is enshrined in a literature that is growing in volume and favor every day."

Mr. Low thought he was being funny when he wrote that—certainly he did not mean to be taken literally. But the Eleventh Edition of the *Encyclopedia Britannica* (1910) was not trying to be funny—when it said that "it is not uncommon to meet with [American] newspaper articles of which an untravelled Englishman would hardly be able to understand a sentence." Our own *Evening Post* (N. Y.) has recently plucked from the Philadelphia *Public Ledger* a typical newspaper headline written in "American" which would probably elicit cries of acute distress from any untravelled

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<sup>1</sup> *The American Language*, by H. L. Mencken. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1919.

citizen of Liverpool. It reads thus: CARFARE GOUGE PUT UP TO EDGE." One might hold that four out of those six words are slang, and that an Englishman should not be expected to understand foreign slang at sight, any more than an American should be expected to be reciprocally intelligent. But at what point does a word or a phrase cease to be slang and become respectable? Is "gouge" (the noun) any longer to be regarded as slang? We are not sure. "Put up to"?—yes, perhaps.

A writer in the London *Daily Mail* recently essayed to make plain the way of the English movie fan confronted by American films. He deemed it needful to define for the British "cinema" spectator such familiar elements of our American language as *hoodlum*, *hobo*, *bunco-steerer*, *rubberneck*, *drummer*, *sucker*, *dive* (the noun), and *graft*. Now which of these are "slang,"—and, as such, permissably baffling to a foreigner,—and which belong to our polite speech? Beyond any question at all, *hoodlum* has ceased to be slang, and is now admitted into the drawing-rooms of "polite" writers and allowed to sit at ease on the chintz. Just as certainly, *rubberneck* has not yet had its adam's apple scrubbed in preparation for the starched collar of genteel usage. It is still "slang" (though, as slang, it is what the azygous F. P. A. would call "Old, old stuff," and what the returning Parisianized doughboy would doubtless call *vieux chapeau*). But it is, beyond dispute, slang, even if it is stale slang, and one cannot imagine it being used in a piece of serious writing by Mr. Paul Elmer More. Surely *graft* (the noun) has ceased to be slang; but how about *hobo*? Would Mr. More use *hobo*? It is not a matter of age at all. Age may wither and custom stale, but they do not necessarily legitimize: for *dead-beat*, whose origin has been traced to 1877, is still expected to eat with its knife and wear "made" cravats, whereas *dive* (in the sense of a "low" resort) is now perfectly good academic American, though it is of later origin than *dead-beat*.

It is all very perplexing indeed. And if foreigners like the English are not going to teach American with earnest and intelligent assiduity, what is to happen? Someone has said that it will all come out right, because the English are appreciative and acquisitive enough to appropriate a linguistic invention as soon as we turn it out, and incorporate it in their own language. But how does that help

to promote comprehension if the Englishman mistakes the meaning of the words he fancies and wants to appropriate? We have heard one Englishman explain to another Englishman that when an American called someone a "dead beat" he meant to denote an undertaker. And there is this further difficulty: If American is to be taught in English schools, how are the instructors to know whether an American word is still "slang" (and therefore negligible in the present education of English boys and girls), or whether we have taken the verbal unfortunate off the streets and made an Honest Woman of her? We ourselves don't always know.

What would an English school-teacher make of such an ordinary American sentence as this: "He had a skirt with him"? Is *skirt*, in this sense, "slang"? No doubt. But for concise and comprehensive and triumphant expressiveness, it is irreplaceable. Try to convey exactly the same sense, with the same economy, using any word that the *Spectator* would use. It can't be done. We have here an authentic addition to expressive speech, not merely a lazy substitute; and in five years you may find it in a New York *Times* editorial—without quotation-marks.

To anyone who has read Mr. H. L. Mencken's new book, the inspiration of the foregoing reflections will be obvious. Mr. Mencken in this book is more than engrossing. He is pestiferous. For is it not pestiferous to tie one to the tail of a 320-word book, in smallish print, from milking-time till sun-up? That is what will happen ("infallibly," as Mr. Barrie's Policeman says) to anyone whose trade is words, English or American; and it is probably what will happen to anyone else who is sufficiently interested to begin Mr. Mencken's book.

Every newspaper editor knows that an unfailing way to educe a torrent of correspondence from his readers is to start some verbal controversy. It is as certain to produce results as the throwing of a tomato omelette into an electric fan—an experiment which Mr. Oliver Herford (we believe) once declared to be the most urgent of his suppressed desires. We think Mr. Mencken has started something almost as exciting as the realization of Mr. Herford's secret ambition would be. His title alone is enough to rejoice the soul of any newspaper editor who might have thought to use it to initiate

a discussion. "The American Language"! Does it exist? Is it different from standard English, "not merely in vocabulary, to be disposed of in an alphabetical list," but "in conjugation and declension, in metaphor and idiom, in the whole fashion of using words"? Mr. Mencken set out to prove that it is, and he has pulled off an achievement of extraordinary interest and importance.

This is no mere dictionary of Americanisms, as its publisher justly observes, but an attempt—an exceedingly able attempt—"to investigate the lines of growth of the language in America, with particular attention to its spoken form." Mr. Mencken examines the grammar of colloquial America, American spelling, the influence of immigrant languages upon English in America, the mutations of American surnames, American proverbs, American slang. It would be impossible to do justice to his book without carrying representation and discussion to an impracticable length. There is no help for it but to be unjust to his treatise, and unwillingly seem to contract its scope and comprehensiveness by dwelling upon one or two of its many significant aspects.

One's agreement with Mr. Mencken is so nearly one hundred per cent that one gets a certain low-lived satisfaction from disagreeing—when one can. Our chief difference with him is caused by what we feel to be a defect of emphasis. It seems to us that Mr. Mencken is too much dazzled by what he somewhere calls our "incomparable capacity for projecting hidden and often fantastic relationships into arresting parts of speech." Such a term as *rubberneck*, he thinks, is almost a complete treatise on national psychology. "It has in it precisely the boldness and disdain of ordered forms that are so characteristically American." The American "likes to make his language as he goes along." We incline, he thinks, toward a directness of statement which, at its worst, lacks restraint and urbanity. So far, he thinks, we have escaped tall-talk, Johnsonese, machine-made jargon. We "rebel instinctively" against circumlocution. "There is more than mere humorous contrast between the famous placard in the wash-room of the British Museum: *These Basins Are For Casual Ablutions Only*, and the familiar sign at American railway crossings: *Stop! Look! Listen.*"

At our best, there is no denying the fact that we are

wonders at inventing bold, vivid, concise, direct, and brilliantly expressive speech. *Joy-ride* is incomparable. So is *standpatter*. So are *lounge-lizard*, *high-brow*, *bone-head*, *tight-wad*, *road-louse*; *barrel* (for illicit affluence), *pork* (for public graft). There is no doubt that we have a creative way with language—let us admit it. But we think Mr. Mencken is a little too easy with us, a little under-critical. Along with this obvious tendency of the American language toward condensation, we must recognize—if we look steadily and honestly—another tendency, equally typical, in the opposite direction. We mean the patent American love for the verbally evasive, the verbally indirect, ambiguous, redundant.

We love the pretentious in speech, the absurdly ornate, the circumlocutory. It was our beloved America that invented *tonorial parlor*; that adores the clumsily elaborate, the timidly genteel phrase; that prefers a shambling euphemism to a racy and swift directness. It was in America, in 1918, that the Army Medical Corps complained of the handicap imposed upon their work of essential public education because of the anserine squeamishness of the newspapers, which in most cases refused to print its bulletins regarding the prevalence of syphilis because, as one blameless journalistic soul explained, "the use of such terms as 'gonorrhea,' 'syphilis,' and even 'venereal diseases' *would not add to the tone of the papers*" (the italics are ours). Such fatuous and panicky evasions as *statutory offense for adultery*, or *an interesting condition for pregnant*, are typically American. It is said that the *New York Evening Post* only recently permitted its reporters to use the bold term *street-walker*.

This trait, so far as it concerns language that touches upon the more urgent realities of the flesh, is due, of course, merely to our irremediable Puritan hang-over. Mr. Mencken recognizes this truth, and has his fun with it. How can one thank him sufficiently for incidentally unearthing the fact that during the Victorean era in England the linguistic drapers, seeking a polite substitute for *bull*, which was banned as too gross for refined ears, hit upon and used the enchanting subterfuge, *gentleman-cow*? But while England has for the most part recovered from that ludicrous and horrible distemper, America has not. Mr. Mencken refers to a recent example of the use of *male-cow*

for *bull* as quoted in the *Journal* of the American Medical Association for November 17, 1917.

Mr. Mencken might point to the edifying fact that the American who now represents us abroad has not hesitated to use in public discourse such phrases as *going some*, and *hog* (as a verb). That is indeed all to the good. But Mr. Wilson is sufficiently expert in the use of language to know when to express himself like Walter Bagehot and when to express himself like the Man in the Street. Mr. Wilson's speech is, however, scarcely typical of the American language. Take a speech that is; not that of the motorman in New York, the ironworker in Pittsburgh, the corner grocer in St. Louis, the carpenter in Ohio: that, in the main, as Mr. Mencken says, is "a highly virile and defiant dialect," disdainful of precedent, without self-consciousness, "deriving its principles from the rough and ready logic of every day." Take the speech of the semi-educated American—the habitual speech of the American manufacturer, of the lower grade of Congressman, of the small-town matron, of the T. B. M., of the average newspaper-man—the American language that is used in a million prosperous provincial homes, a million business offices, a million newspaper "stories" and editorials. It is a speech that is flabby with timorous euphemisms. It is shambling, mincing, cheaply "refined," indecently "respectable." It seems almost incapable of direct and honest speech. It not only says *limbs* when it means *legs* (which is merely the Puritan complex uttering a feebly shameful reminder of its dirty past), but it fails to say what it means even when it means something wholly unrelated to Sex and Sin. One would not expect a "nice" American woman to emulate the shameless English and call a female canine a *bitch*. She would be content with *dog*; or, if pressed, would take refuge in *lady-dog*—we have heard it. (Mr. Mencken admits this fact, but attempts to account for it by the delightfully naïve and excessively indulgent explanation that it is due "largely, perhaps," to the English people's "greater familiarity with country life.") But why does the average semi-educated, middle-class American (who, bless his amiable soul, rules our intellectual life) say *under the influence of liquor* when he means *drunk*, and *retire* when he means *go to bed*?

We think it is because the average American, despite his indisputable liking for the succinct and the vividly direct, has a concurrent, deep-seated, ineradicable inclination toward the euphemistic, the evasive, the stilted, the highfalutin'. This tendency permeates the speaking and writing of Americans, in regions of reflection and reaction where the Puritan complex does not enter at all. Is it because the American is really, for all his superficial raciness and vividness and impatience, at heart a quaking traditionalist, an incurable side-stepper? One sometimes suspects that this is so.

Mr. Mencken speaks of "the disdain of ordered forms" that is "so characteristically American." We think this "disdain" is largely superficial. In his heart of hearts, the American loves the old ways, the conventional ways. The art that he loves is saccharine, pretty, conventional—he infinitely prefers Howard Chandler Christy to Glackens; the Pretty-Girl, Little Tot, Lover-and-Sweetheart confections on the popular magazine covers to the drawings of Boardman Robinson or Art Young. He would willingly chuck Walt Whitman any day for Longfellow. He thrills at the *Méditation Religieuse* from "Thais" and goes to sleep over Moussorgsky.

But all this is hardly Mr. Mencken's fault. We have dwelt upon it merely because he did not, and we think his indulgence a defect in a book that is almost always sound, shrewd, discerning, just. This treatise is accomplished with humor, with brilliancy, with sympathetic imagination. And, as we began by saying, it is deplorably engrossing.

LAWRENCE GILMAN.